

Pencils, Paper, *People*: Breaking the Standards

By Emily Faust

Susan sat at her kitchen table and filled out her fourth college application. She had by now learned the routine: name, address, birth date, social security number, transcripts, recommendations, application fees. And then came the part that always made her nervous—submitting her college acceptance test scores. Her scores were not as high as she had wanted, but after three attempts to improve her scores, these results would have to do. As she gathered her final application documents and slipped them into a large envelope, she secretly fought an impulse to write *I am so much more than a bunch of bubbles filled in with a No. 2 pencil!* in big, red, capital letters across the front of the envelope. Feeling worried and frustrated, Susan finally dropped drove into town and dropped the envelope into the big blue mailbox outside the Post Office. The threat of rejection hung in the air around her like dense fog.

In fact, many American high school seniors, like Susan, know that taking a college entrance exam, such as the American College Test (ACT) and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is their first chance to grab onto the door handle that will hopefully open up to them the world of a college education. Some students, especially those who might not be skilled at taking tests, barely touch the handle with their fingertips let alone fling it open. Essentially, because of the ACT and SAT, the door to a good education can slam shut in a student's face before it even opens, and the student's opportunities become quite limited by a simple test score.

College admission boards assign a great deal of weight to these tests scores throughout the nation. In recent years, using standardized test scores as indicators of future success in academia has been questioned nearly across the board. For example, do such tests truly assess a student's level of intelligence? Why do standardized tests have time limits for answering questions? Do time limits affect a student's ability to answer a question in a way that reflects his or her competence? Shouldn't more of a student's high school experience determine how well that student will do in college? Isn't there more to a student than what is reflected in a basic mathematical calculation? Many students and educators have asked these and other questions about standardized tests and are concerned about how test scores can sway college applications and acceptance. Aside from the common sense answer—that, yes, so much emphasis on a single score seems silly—a closer examination of these tests reveals that test scores are a genuinely poor indicator of a student's potential and performance at the post-secondary level, and test scores should be weighed accordingly within college admissions criteria. Colleges should welcome creative, motivated, and productive critical thinkers based on these merits alone instead of using test scores to “weed out” students who, presumably, are not as smart their counterparts—the expedient test-takers, who focus on memorization rather than intellectual skill.

For a long time, college admissions boards have used standardized tests to evaluate potential academic performance through empirical and numerical data. The type of learning assessed by the ACT and SAT is simply the abilities to memorize information and demonstrate limited problem solving skills, in which even the procedure to solve the problem is pre-defined, such as solving a math problem or balancing a chemical equation. Because the tests are standardized—meaning that everyone who takes the test is treated equally and expected to know the same information—the tests are fair in some ways: everyone gets the same test and time limit, and tests are scored in a consistent homogenous way. The tests are cost effective because they are generic, mass produced, and scored by computer. Test results also provide quantitative data. Data can be evaluated on several levels, such as looking at the contrast in states and/or school districts, and tracking various socioeconomic groups for years. Data can be isolated to point out weaknesses in an individual's academic profile or, on a larger scale, the profile of an entire district or state. Standardized tests are useful in that they allow researchers to track improvements or lack thereof over time. Also, the tests are intended to align with curriculums at both the national and state levels, and policymakers use tests to hold school districts accountable for what they teach because standardized tests are used to assess a school's ability to meet requirements of curriculums. However, every school, teacher, principle, and curriculum is at least somewhat different.

Therefore, the idea of “standard” test being given to students nationwide—who learn from massively different curricular objectives—is absurd. How, after all, could all of the students in the U.S. possibly have the *exact* same knowledge? Simply put: they can’t. And that is why evaluating students based on test scores is a fundamentally flawed system of evaluation. Although researchers can track data over time, how useful is this data anyway?

Furthermore, perhaps more importantly, standardized tests have been widely accused poorly measuring true intelligence and academic ability. In the article “They Knew Calculus When They Left,” one expert shares two students’ journeys into higher education: one succeeds while the other fails. The failing student earned a respectable but not fantastic SAT score but achieved excellent high school grades. However, this student was never taught to think in the way of the university—he was never taught to think analytically and critically (St. Jarre 124-125). The author of the same article, Kevin St. Jarre, explains that “John [the struggling student] had been sent to the university as one of [his] high school’s most successfully trained pets...[but] Michael [the successful student], on the other hand, was an intellectual survivor. Michael had limited self-discipline and he was able to learn by seeing through nonsense portion of public education, taking what he wanted from the system (125). As St. Jarre illustrates through his example, there is much more to knowledge, intelligence, and learning than obeying rules and running an academic obstacle course. Being “book smart” may help one to earn a great test score, but that same student may fare poorly in other areas, such as creativity and critical thinking. This is just one expert—among many—who suggests that standardized tests are a pitiful measure of a student’s ability to “survive” in college.

In order to understand how and why standardized tests limit an individual’s preparation for higher education, one only needs to think back to when all this standardized testing appeared on the national stage in the first place—when the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the brainchild of the George W. Bush Administration, was enacted; now, NCLB is one of the most divisive, controversial, and unpopular policies in the U.S. NCLB implemented the first standardized testing for students from third to eighth grade each year and then once again in high school. NCLB’s purpose was to collect data rather than improve the quality of education. As mentioned above, some testing data is useful. For example, test-score data of school districts is public information, so parents can use it to choose quality schools for their children. More controversially, however, funding is tied to student performance on the tests. Therefore, schools in poor areas can only afford to hire second-rate teachers for lower salaries, whereas schools in wealthy areas have much more funding and can therefore hire better and more qualified teachers at higher pay.

What is lost due to the relationship between test scores and funding is teachers’ freedom—or *option*—to use their creativity, inspiration, inquiry, and spontaneity. Instead, teachers are pressured to align their curriculums to “fit” the standards. Because of NCLB, teachers must “teach to the test” and prepare students to answer a generic collection of multiple-choice and short-answer questions. The rigidity of NCLB leaves little room for students to explore and discover independently and collaboratively, and to engage in their own education. High-school students take the ACT and SAT, and their scores are used as indicators of a school districts’ success in core areas of educational proficiency, such as English, math, reading and science. Through NCLB legislation, standardized testing has become ingrained in the American education system, so much that the tests are used to assess students before they even enter college. NCLB itself faces major opposition, and next under attack is the standardized testing system created by the NCLB. Although standardized tests seem to be thriving, parents, students, admissions board members, educators, and others feel that defining academic “proficiency” by a test score is not only misleading but *wrong*.

Standardized tests misrepresent groups of students and individual students. Tests provide a snapshot of the learner, but much about the learner is then left out of the picture. Learning is a process; learning means acquiring skills meant to engage the student into the learning itself. Generally, Americans think that understanding basic facts, concepts, and vocabulary is important, but it is more important that a student can employ higher-level thinking skills. If a test supposed to indicate student success, then the test should provide the most complete picture as possible of the learner. In a *New York Times* column titled “New York State is Reshaping Testing Systems for Schools,” James Dao points out criticisms of

standardized testing and suggests reforms. Dao argues, “The critics...argue that multiple-choice examinations...often fail to measure the more complex skills needed for college and work: critical thinking, problem solving, writing and speaking” (45). Even at the elementary level, then, students only learn basics instead of beginning to develop the skills of critical thinking that will later become essential. The article “Standardized Tests Face a Crisis Over Standards” reports that Kris Kaase, a Mississippi state representative, also criticizes standardized testing’s inability to provide a clear picture of the learner (Winerip 7). In the end, many agree that standardized testing creates a faulty, incomplete view of a learner’s capabilities.

Michael Winerip (author of the article mentioned above) also contends that tests are limited because they are designed to be cost effective (7). He goes on to say that to efficiently design and make standardized testing cost effective the tests must be produced, administered, and scored as cheaply as possible. Presently, Winerip says, tests are more and more often listed as requirements for various certifications, licensures, and graduations, and state and federal funding are so enmeshed in testing that the whole issue has become a giant convoluted mess (Winerip 7). As test scores are now required for an increasing number of professional certifications, graduations from high school, and college admittance, they are also linked to federal and state funding at the K-12 levels. In the current situation, tests are—must be—designed and produced inexpensively. Thomas Toch, co-director of a new research group called Education Sector, reveals that grading essay questions can take weeks and cost between fifty cents and five dollars, whereas it costs just “pennies for each multiple choice question” (qtd. in Winerip 7). As a result, “to save time and money,” at least two states have adopted an entirely multiple-choice test (Toch qtd. in Winerip 7). Efforts to make standardized tests cheaper have limited the tests to narrow types of questions for broad and various groups of students.

If we cannot do away with standardized tests altogether, they at least need to be reformed to allow more students to do well. Winerip asserts that simple reforms that attempt to require more than memorization to answer multiple-choice questions to include short-answer and essay questions are often thwarted by state and federal officials because of costs:

Connecticut’s reputation is to produce tests that are the best in the country, says James Popham, a national testing expert who is professor emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles. The Fed’s (Federal Governments) position is so shortsighted. No Child Left Behind is supposed to be increasing the caliber of education and [NCLB] is lowering it. It’s eroding the power of the test to explain what kids can and cannot do. (7)

Popham has a point that standardized tests were created with good intentions—to drive up the quality of education and provide opportunities to students who work hard. However, not all schools are equal, and therefore there is no standardization in teachers’ pay. Inner-city kids in lower socio-economic areas suffer at the hands of low-quality education while middle- and upper-class kids excel because their teachers, equipment, and materials are superior. Because of huge gaps in educational quality, reforms to standardized testing are necessary to increase fairness and objectivity.

There are other problems that create inequality and injustice. One of these is errors in the tests themselves. Winerip points out that sometimes the tests are simply wrong, going on to explain that one company, Pearson, which produces tests, “admitted that it incorrectly scored thousands of...tests” and another company, McGraw-Hill, “included several questions from the practice test...on the real test” (7). Also, one expert warns of the dangers of sacrificing high academic standards, saying that states are forced to “dumb down” tests in order to switch to inexpensive, machine-scored tests (Toch qtd. in Winerip 7). Grading standardized tests can take weeks while some states, like Florida, can administer “a million multiple choice tests in a day” (Toch qtd. in Winerip 7). Obviously, standardized testing has gotten out of hand if there is such a big gap between the number of people taking tests and how quickly they are scored. Not only is there backlash from the general public, but education officials and politicians are also seeing the uselessness of a system created with good intentions—NCLB—but that has failed and affected the academic futures of many young Americans.

The time to move beyond the standardized test is upon us. NCLB and standardized tests have taught us that we must change how we construct a clear picture of a learner and develop new, creative ways to measure achievement and intelligence. Thankfully, there is hope for future students, as some progressive states have incorporated new performance measures into their tests. Dao explains that the changes should include “creating a fundamentally new grading system based...on...oral examinations, group projects and portfolios made up of a broad range of student work...,” including items like creative writing, nonfiction compositions in several subjects, science projects, and math equations (45). While standardized testing will still be a significant part of every student’s academic life, tests could be rewritten to include a broader range of questions besides the dreaded multiple-choice questions (Dao 45). Broadening assessment and deemphasizing standardized tests will allow for a better understanding of the learner and reduce the number of students whose test scores do not reflect their true intelligence.

Reforms also push students and educators to move beyond simple factual learning and “teaching to the test,” which focuses on simple facts not critical thinking. If allowed to be creative thinkers, students can be more actively engaged in analysis, criticism, and synthesis of knowledge. Dao suggests the “portfolio” system, in which students collect their best work on an ongoing basis, and their collections are checked and evaluated regularly by teachers. In the portfolio system, students are encouraged to work continually—revising, collaborating, participating, and demonstrating new learning—and all of this would all factor into the “final grade,” which would replace the ACT or SAT test score (Dao 45). Supporters of portfolios recognize that learning is a dynamic process in which improvement happens over time, and that portfolios, “when used in conjunction with other performance measures [can] ... push students away from rote learning” (Dao 45). Daniel Koretz, a resident scholar at the Rand Institute of Education and Training, explains that the process of learning would be the focus year-round, unlike in testing where a student could potentially do poorly throughout the year and still get a high test score just for doing well the day of the exam (qtd. in Dao 45). In a portfolio system, knowledge becomes much more than a bunch of pencil-blackened bubbles on a scantron sheet. It is unquestionable that these emerging performance measures better indicate a learner’s future academic success than an ACT or SAT score.

In fact, ACT and SAT scores are a kind of profiling—a way to dump students into categories that are often unfair and rarely accurate. Columnist and public school superintendent John A. Chambers agrees. In his article “When Standardized Tests Go Wrong,” he points out major problems with the “current overemphasis” on testing as a way to judge student performance (15). Chambers argues that “We should be encouraging innovation rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, recognizing what overwhelming majority of people ... already know: Every student is different, complex and deserving of more than an endless battery of tests” (15). What is being seen at the primary and secondary level also holds true for higher education. There are definitely other options than test scores that can be used to profile student learning

Overall, standardized test scores are a poor indicator of student ability and do not provide a complete view of the learner. Although testing has been around for a long time and do serve a limited purpose, the debate about the value of such tests is just too heated and controversial. Currently, tests scores are being used more and more for academic and even professional assessment and government funding is still connected to test scores. Standardized tests like the ACT and SAT have proven to do little more than assess rote learning—memorization rather than analytical and critical thinking. There have been suggestions at the K-12 levels to modify assessment to more authentically measure student performance. Colleges should also be looking to other indicators of student performance beyond simple and flawed test scores that require memorization not intelligence. After all, as Chambers notes, “In school as in the workplace, a paper and pencil and test alone can never fully measure up to ability or achievement’ (15). How can we not agree that the time has come to acknowledge and admit our mistakes, leave NCLB behind, and value students for what they are, not what they aren’t: bubbles on a scantron sheet nervously pencil-blackened by students terrified that their scores will not do them justice.

Works Cited

- Chambers, John A. "When Standardized Tests Go Wrong." *New York Times* 29 Jun 2003, Late Edition (East Coast): 14WC:15. *National Newspaper Abstracts (3)*, ProQuest. Web. 30 Jul. 2010.
- Dao, James. "New York State Is Reshaping Testing System For Schools." *New York Times* 1 May 1994, Late Edition (East Coast): Sec.1:45. *National Newspaper Abstracts (3)*, ProQuest. Web. 30 Jul. 2010.
- St. Jarre, Kein. "They Knew Calculus When They Left: The Thinking Disconnect Between High School and University." *Phi Delta Kappan* 90.2 (2008): 123-126. *Research Library Core*, ProQuest. Web. 30 Jul. 2010.
- Winerip, Michael. "Standardized Tests Face A Crisis Over Standards." *New York Times* 22 Mar. 2006, Late Edition (East Coast): B7. *National Newspaper Abstracts (3)*, ProQuest. Web. 30 Jul. 2010.